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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 JEDDAH 000489

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, NEA/PPD, EEB/ESC, DRL, INR/OPS

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SUBJECT: REDISCOVERING SOUTHERN ARABIA: NAJHRAN, THE EMIRATE  
OF KING ABDULLAH'S SON PRINCE MISHAL

REF: A. DHAHRAN 258

[B](#). RIYADH 482

[C](#). STATE 120774

[D](#). 06 JEDDAH 738

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Classified By: Consul General Martin R. Quinn for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)  
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[1](#)1. (C) Summary: A ConGen visit to the southern Arabia emirate of Najran, December 18-19, 2009, revealed a tranquil, fertile valley tucked within mountainous terrain, where the traditional way of life has remained surprisingly unaffected by the recent violence in Yemen, at various points 5-15 km from Najran city. Prince Mishal bin Abdullah, the new governor, King Abdullah's 6th son, friendly and welcoming, seems popular with his people and supportive of U.S. interests and engagement, but may be slightly hands-off on the running of his jurisdiction. The local government has recently made two large infrastructure investments -- a completed highway and an in-process university; however, population growth combined with water shortages and lack of private sector industries have resulted in significant unemployment, a government-dependent local society, and a need for increased vocational and female employment. The visit provided follow-up opportunities for U.S. business interests, cultural/educational outreach and for deepening our knowledge of the Shia population. End summary.

MOUNTAINOUS TERRAIN, FERTILE VALLEY, CONSERVATIVE SOCIETY

[1](#)2. (SBU) Surrounded by large mountains and rock formations, Najran is located in a green valley from 5-15 km north of the Yemen border at an elevation of almost 4,000 feet. Driving for 2 hours between Abha and Najran, ConGen officers passed small, scattered villages, with several rock quarries and a new cement plant along the way. The town of Najran is not conspicuously affluent, but endowed with farmable land and some tourist attractions of historical value, such as the extensive Al Okhdood archaeological site. While a general impression of picturesque rural poverty registered with us, contrary to impressions in earlier reporting from a decade

ago, we saw no beggars, no vagrants, and no obvious manifestations of popular discontent. The emirate's population of around 700,000, which doubled over the past 20 years, pursues a traditional lifestyle, sustaining themselves mainly through agriculture, small trade, and mining -- those who are not employed by the government. The local mineral water bottling factory (owned by Jeddah businessman, Stanford-educated Dr. Musallam Musallam, chairman of SKAB) has a 30% Saudi work force, most of whom were described as biding their time until they find higher-paying, less strenuous government jobs. As a result of dramatic population growth and the water shortage, unemployment is becoming a problem. As expected outside the Kingdom's major cities, Najran's society is conservative and male-dominated, exemplified by our noticing no more than 6 female citizens over the course of a two-day visit, whether in the markets, on the streets, or in other cars. Despite the presence of a fluent Arabic-speaking female officer as part of our delegation, we were able to engage with no Najrani women.

#### LITTLE APPARENT EFFECT OF YEMEN BORDER ISSUES

13. (C) We were surprised by the absence of heightened military/security presence so near the Yemen border. An atmosphere of calm and nonchalance prevailed in Najran as its citizens went about their daily lives, only dimly aware of the action involving the Houthis on the border of neighboring Jizan. During our stay, we saw nothing suggesting ongoing military activity in Najran or the presence of Yemeni refugees; neither did we hear any explosions or gunfire from across the Yemeni border. Two Najran interlocutors did acknowledge they occasionally, at night, heard sounds of explosions coming from a distance, over the mountains (ref

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A). The only hint of anything out of the ordinary was an uninhabited camp consisting of roughly 100 small tents observed by the roadside halfway between Abha and Najran, near the town of Dhahran Al Jonoub. We later learned these camps were set up as temporary housing for Yemenis crossing the border, consistent with the message from Najran government officials that they are prepared in case the conflict spreads to their region. Most Najranis with whom we spoke, ranging from shopkeepers to businessmen and government officials, described life in Najran as unchanged, contrasting with the upheaval experienced further west in Jizan. Most were dismissive of the suggestion that there had been any interruption to the normal course of their quiet lives. Additionally, our interlocutors (many of whom were Shia themselves), described the Shia sentiment in the region as supportive of the Saudi position toward the Houthis. Prince Mishal bin Abdullah, the new governor of Najran since March 2009, explained the calm as due to the Najran government receiving cooperation from the Yemeni border tribes, who have helped to keep the Houthis at bay. Although only 80 km of the 1,200 km border is fenced, with the rest guarded by roving patrols, the director of the Agricultural Research Center remarked that no Yemenis have crossed the border looking for work during the past 2 months. Additionally, contacts pointed out that there is much more intermarriage between Saudis and Yemenis of the same tribe in the Jizan area, leading to increased cross-border traffic, whereas the social ties between Najranis and Yemenis are more distant. Due to its relative geographical isolation as a fertile town ringed round by mountains, Najran gives the impression of supporting a self-sufficient if inbred culture.

PORTRAIT OF THE NEW GOVERNOR: PRINCE MISHAL BIN ABDULLAH BIN ABDUL AZIZ

14. (C) Prince Mishal bin Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, the sixth son of King Abdullah with wife Princess Tady bint Mishaan Al Faisal Al Jarba, was appointed Governor of Najran in March 2009, taking over for sixty-two-year-old Prince Mishal bin

Saud bin Abdul Aziz, who served as governor for 18 years (ref B). A young man in his early forties, the new Mishal is reportedly far more popular with the citizens of Najran than was his predecessor. Two men in Prince Mishal's office who also served under the former governor described him as a "Governor of the People," consistent with previous reporting on Mishal's efforts to improve Najranis' quality of life. The prince is reported to have changed most of his immediate staff upon arrival, with the exception of the public relations department: Ibrahim Al-Sedran and Majed Aseery, our escorts during the visit. In our conversation with Prince Mishal, he projected a friendly, welcoming demeanor, good English, and was open to and very interested in all forms of increased U.S./Saudi cooperation in his region. He appeared not to be preoccupied with the minutiae of day-to-day administration, spoke in generalities, and did not volunteer great detail about new initiatives such as the Najran Holding Company for creating an industrial city, strategies for handling the Yemen issue, or the unemployment problem. It appeared to us that day-to-day matters are likely handled by his right-hand man and office director, Dr. Sultan Muhammed Al Haza'a.

¶5. (C) The Prince was vague about his academic background, answering "everywhere" when asked where he studied his English, before finally indicating the UK, without specifying an institution (though he has no hint of a British accent). Born in Riyadh, he spent part of his education in the U.S. and UK, before returning to Riyadh to work at MFA, rising to a high-level post in the National Guard, and serving as an advisor at the Royal Court. Prince Mishal confessed his surprise at his father's appointing him governor of Najran, remarking that he had only visited Najran twice before. Now, the prince said, he "loves Najran." Married in January 2009 to a distant cousin, Princess Loulouah bint Nawaf bin Mohammed bin Abdullah bin Abdulrahman Al Saud, Mishal seems

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well-traveled, specifically mentioning how much he enjoyed Las Vegas, while fondly reminiscing about his 8-month tour in New York in 2006 representing the SAG at the United Nations. (Note: Mishal's father-in-law, Nawaf, is on the board of the Football Federation, President of the Amateur Athletic Federation, and is active in business. End note.) Perhaps not the best student in his youth, a possible reason for the ambiguity, Mishal is well-mannered, supportive of U.S. interests, with a good command of English and appears to be popular in Najran. Whether officially encouraged or a manifestation of public affection, the new governor's image appears everywhere on signboards throughout the city; one verbal tribute to him was even painted on a granite mountainside.

INFRASTRUCTURE: NEW ROAD, NEW UNIVERSITY, OLD DAM, WATER SHORTAGES

¶6. (C) The government of Najran has made significant infrastructure investments recently, exemplified by the new four-lane highway connecting Abha and Najran, which in the past 5 months has dramatically cut the time needed for the 300 km trip in half to 2.5 hours, and the new multi-billion-riyal Najran University campus project, expected to be one of the largest in the Kingdom upon completion in the next five years. Current student enrollment is 16,000 and rising. We visited the Najran Dam, a 277 million SAR (\$74 million) project completed in 1982 by French engineers as a solution to the flash flood problem during annual rains, said to be so intense during the fall that schools years ago used to close for a month. Ironically, during the nearly three decades since the construction of the imposing, 73 meter high dam, Najran has experienced severe drought, a fact wryly noted by Najranis conscious of the serious water shortage. As in most of the region, the water shortage is a major challenge in Najran, with an economy especially dependent on agriculture. Officials at the Najran

Agricultural Research Center, an organization aiming to improve horticulture technology for food sustainability, mainly in the citrus sector, stated that during the years of drought Najran's annual demand for water has actually risen over three times its annual supply. The Agricultural Center's current solution of piping in underground water from the Empty Quarter desert appears short-term at best. At worst, the effort may further deplete ground water. According to one source, wells which used to strike water at 30-40 meters, must now be extended to at least 80 meters.

MORE PEOPLE, LESS WATER, FEWER JOBS, WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

17. (C) The population boom over the past generation, coupled with the water shortage and the lack of development of any significant industry in Najran, has created a society with unemployment problems that is heavily dependent upon the government. Ali Yehia Al Hayani (strictly protect), a member of Prince Mishal's public relations department who also contributes to "Al Iqtisadia" Arabic daily as a Najran stringer, declared that "social change must happen." His monthly salary of 3,000 SAR (\$800) as a mid-level civil servant is not enough to make ends meet, especially since 50% of his salary must pay the rent. As a result, Ali's wife works as a teacher to supplement the family income. Moreover, Ali and many of his government colleagues are considering taking jobs in Riyadh and Jeddah in the private sector since there are no private sector options in Najran. One way to combat this problem may be to increase employment for women and for Saudis in vocational sectors, huge social changes given the conservatism of Najran society. According to Professor Mohammed Ibrahim Al Hassan, UCLA Ph.D. organic chemist, former vice rector of King Saud University, and the President of the 3-year-old Najran University, 70% of the university's students are female, whereas according to Ali Al Hayani, Najranis wouldn't even consider sending their daughters to universities only a few years ago. Reportedly

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many local Saudi women are already working in hospitals as doctors, nurses and medical technologists. In addition to increased female participation in the work force, and broadening the programs of public sector institutions like the university, another option to combat unemployment in Najran is to have more Saudis work in vocational-level employment -- generally a hard sell in Saudi "prestige-oriented" society. Professor Al Hassan stated that the 95% rate of high school students matriculating into universities is actually a bad thing, as it means that all those students will expect to work in high-level, managerial jobs and very few as technicians, mechanics and craftsmen.

A SMALL GLIMPSE OF DEMOCRACY AND DEBATE THROUGH THE NAJLAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

18. (U) The Board of the Najran Chamber of Commerce and Industry is made up of 12 members, 8 directly elected and 4 appointed, while the Chamber itself boasts 10,000 members. There appears to be a fair level of debate among the board members, as was seen through a back-and-forth between Chairman Ali Hamad Al Hamrour and a board member on the topic of U.S. auto companies during our visit. Of note were the board's concerns over GM's declining presence in the region, contrasting reports of GM's failure to provide auto-servicing to its customers with those of the more successful Toyota and Ford distributors. The Chamber registered its interest in encouraging a U.S. trade delegation to visit Najran. Members also discussed mining's significant role in Najran's economy; Najran produces 70% of KSA's granite. Najran has historically mined raw minerals, then shipped the ore to China and elsewhere for processing and ultimate sale. Najran is expanding its mining industry to include processing up to the final finished product within the region, rather than sending it elsewhere. Impression conveyed is that American

involvement in mining would be welcome. Although Najran lacks major private-sector industry, there is a market for U.S. goods, services and know-how in the sectors of water technology, automobiles, mining, furniture and clothing. We heard comments about the low prices and quality of Chinese and Singaporean retail goods coupled with a stated desire to purchase higher quality, longer lasting American merchandise -- if only they were locally available. Nearest outlets are in Abha, 2.5 hours away by car on the new highway.

¶9. (C) Chamber of Commerce board members clearly represent the Najran economic elite and were described by one Oklahoma University graduate, and failed citrus farmer (1,000 of his trees dying due to the water shortage and increased salinity), employed since the late 1970s in a salaried position at the governorate, as "a lot of rich people with no idea about how to invest or spend their money." This comment by our host for the first evening (who then disappeared) was one potentially revealing indication of tension between the "haves" and the "have nots" of Najran society.

#### A STEP BACK IN TIME -- AL OKHDOOD AND AN ANCIENT GRIEVANCE

¶10. (U) Of cultural and historic significance in Najran is the pre-Islamic archaeological site, Al Okhdood. Founded in the 7th century BC, with a history traceable back 4,000 years, this 5 km long farming city survived into the 10th century AD. Such was its power and influence along the trading/incense route that it is even mentioned in the Quran (Surah 85, Al-Buruj) as the site of the reported persecution and slaughter (in a trench/pit of fire) of early Najran Christians by Dhu Nawas, described as "a cruel Jewish king of Yemen." What are believed to be the charred remains of the pit were pointed out to us, without great elaboration or any attempt to suggest contemporary applications. The Quranic reference may be a key reason why the site is being excavated as a tourist attraction. School groups regularly tour the site, which has been developed since 1986. Wall carvings, coins, shards and other recovered artifacts provide glimpses

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into the social and political conditions of the city before the Islamic era. With the blessing of Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdul Aziz, the President of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, the Commission is currently restoring Al Okhdood's center, which includes a fortress and mosque, cataloguing and deciphering their finds in a small, well-maintained, respectably-appointed museum. Museum/site director, Saleh Mohamed Al Mereih (potential candidate for an IVLP program), is a Najran native, receiving bachelor's and master's degrees at Riyadh's King Saud University. We were informed that the Al Okhdood site attracted 70,000 visitors last year, mostly Saudi tourists, who generally stay in the city's 22 hotels, only two of which, Holiday Inn and Hyatt, can be considered 4-star or better.

#### COMMENT: FOLLOW-UP OPPORTUNITIES

¶11. (C) Comment: Our 2-year overdue visit to Najran resulted in updated contact information, follow-up options, and a few surprises. Expected were the economic problems associated with population growth and the water shortage, the hospitality of the governor and his staff, and the traditional, down-scale nature of life outside major cities. We were surprised by the absence of an obvious military/security presence given the proximity of the Yemen conflict, the fertility of the land, and the efficiency achieved by the completion of the new Abha-Najran highway. Post will pursue with the Najran Chamber of Commerce the possibility of attracting U.S. business to the region and with Prince Mishal's office for training in English language instruction and a presentation on U.S. educational opportunities. Subsequent visits may shed more light on the status, issues and attitudes of Najran's majority Shia

community. End comment.

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